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ABSTRACT

The New Canaan Public Schools reduced its extended-day (21 hours per week) kindergarten program to half-day sessions (15 hours per week) in an interim program during a 2-year school construction-expansion phase. During a 9-month planning process, an ad hoc committee representing equal membership of teachers and parents from three elementary schools set staffing, curriculum, and class-size priorities to be retained in the interim program. Each school's committee developed a half-day kindergarten plan commensurate with their elementary school's space considerations. The three plans were as follows: (1) children attend school 2 full days and 1 half-day per week; (2) children attend school 3 half-days and 1 full day per week; (3) children attend 5 half-days per week. New Canaan chose the third plan, a kindergarten program that would be staffed with two teachers working cooperatively in both the morning and afternoon sessions with each class having about 20 children in each session. This plan was chosen because the community valued small class sizes with two trained teachers in each class and because it would not cost any more than the current extended-day program. (AJH)

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Extended-Day Kindergarten versus Half-Day Kindergarten: What One School District Decided

Russell Firlik

"Did you hear about the school district that reduced its extended day- 21 hours per week kindergarten program to half day sessions or 15 hours per week? - But they retained their extended day teaching staff in the half-day kindergarten formula as well!" Co-teaching is the new organizational arrangement in New Canaan Public Schools, Connecticut.

How does one of the wealthiest public school systems in Connecticut reduce its kindergarten program to half-day yet maintain its programmatic goals, objectives, and assessments? New Canaan, Connecticut, schools developed a stage-by-stage process and came to terms with the Board of Education's decision to find additional space (2 to 3 rooms) in each of the three elementary schools. Moreover, to address the projected increases in enrollment at the three elementary schools we managed to find a solution to the space issue by reducing the extended- day program to half days. Here is how we went about designing a rich half-day kindergarten program for the children of New Canaan.

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The Seven- Stage Process over a Nine- Month Transition Period:

Stage One: Convene an ad hoc committee representing equal membership in terms of number of teachers and parents from the three elementary schools. In addition to these members of the "Interim Kindergarten Committee" were nursery and day care directors and nursery/day care teachers.

The principals of the three elementary schools established three goals for this committee. Goal No.1: Divide the Interim Committee into three, nine- member individual school committees, consisting of the following membership:

- Three teachers- two kindergarten teachers - one first grade teacher
- Three parents- one parent with an incoming kindergarten child- one parent whose child(ren) had experienced the extended- day kindergarten program- one parent with a 3 year old child who would be enrolled in kindergarten in two years or the last year of the interim- kindergarten program
- Three nursery school/day care representives- one director-two nursery/ day care teachers

The second goal of the committee was to develop a premise statement that would ensure that the established extended- day

kindergarten program would be reinstated after the two- year school construction- expansion phase. The interim half-day kindergarten program will operate for only two years. This was strongly endorsed by the parents, teachers, and administrators on the committee.

The final goal for this committee was to set staffing, curriculum, and class-size priorities from the extended- day program to be retained in the interim program. The New Canaan Public Schools will established these priorities:

- retain staff (two teachers for each class) to enable them to return to the extended day program in two years.
- retain integrated curriculum strategies.
- retain teacher planning time.
- develop a team-teaching organization
- retain appropriate class sizes not to exceed 20 children
- maintain at least 15 hours a week of activities and experiences
- ensure both morning and afternoon sessions will offer the same program
- ensure interim program would not cost more than the extended- day program
- ensure all three kindergarten programs were similal at each school
- ensure two to three additional classroom spaces were opened at each school

Stage Two: After the three goals were established and agreed upon, the next stage was for the three, nine-member school committees to develop a half-day kindergarten plan commensurate with their elementary school's space considerations. Once the three committees designed a plan for a half-day interim program, they would bring their plans to the entire 27- member Interim Kindergarten Committee and discuss the pluses, minues and interesting (P.M.I.) elements of the three plans. The three Plans developed were:

(See Plans A, B. C)

Stage Three: An Analysis of the Three Plans

Comparing and Contrasting Plans A, B, and C

- Group "A" is Morning Session
- Group "B" is Afternoon Session
- All three plans equal 15 hours sessions

<u>Plan A- Features:</u>

- Group A (AM session) and Group B (PM session) attends school one half day on Monday-
- Group A and Group B attends full days 2 days per week

Plans A an B

Plan A

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
8:45-11:45 _AM	Group A no special	Group B special	Group A special	Group B special	Group A special
12:00-3:00 _PM	Group B no special	Group B special	Group A special	Group B special	Group A special

GROUP A (AM session) half day on Mon, Full days on Weds and Fri = 2 1/2 Days
GROUP B (PM session) half day on Mon, Full days on Tues and Thurs = 2 1/2 Days
Teacher's half hour lunch period on Mon staggered- one lunch and one with children- Tues-Fri teachers lunch break during Specials
Specials include Art, Physical Education, Music, Library-Media
Group A (AM) and Group B (PM) sessions equal 3 hours of kindergarten

Plan B

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
8:45-11:45 _AM	Group A *special	Group B special	Group A special	Group A special	Group A special
12:00-3:00 _PM	Group B special	Group B special	Group B special	Group A special	Group B special

GROUP A (AM session) half day on Mon, Wed, Fri ; Full days on Thurs= 2 1/2 Days
GROUP B (PM session) half day on Mon, Wed, Fri ; Full days on Tues = 2 1/2 Days
Teacher's half hour lunch period during Specials
***Specials include Art, Physical Education, Music, Library-Media, Computers**
Group A (AM) and Group B (PM) sessions equal 3 hours/ week of kindergarten

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Plan C

	Mon	Tues	Weds	Thurs	Fri
8:45-11:45 _AM_	Group A *special	Group A special	Group A special	Group A special	Group A special
12:00-3:00 _PM_	Group B ** special	Group B special	Group B special	Group B special	Group B special

GROUP A (AM session) half day on Mon, Tue, Wed, Thur, Fri = 2 1/2 Days
GROUP B (PM session) half day on Mon, Tue, Wed, Thur, Fri = 2 1/2 Days
Teacher's half hour lunch period on Mon -Fri during Specials; ** plus half hour planning period each day
Specials include Art, Physical Education, Music, Library-Media
Group A (AM) and Group B (PM) sessions equal 3 hours of kindergarten

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• Groups A and B attend 15 hours of kindergarten on 2 1/2 days a week.

• A half hour special curriculum area experience (Art, P.E., Music, Library, Computer) would be available twice on Monday when both Am and PM would be at school for a half day session and once each for the four days (Tues-Fri).

This allows the teachers a lunch and planning period five days a week.

Plan B- Features

• Group A (morning session) and Group B (afternoon session) would attend school half days on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for 3 half days per week- Full days on Tuesdays and Thursdays respectively.

• Half hour lunch break with special area activity

• Group A and B in afternoon sessions would attend next day morning session.

• Total of 15 hours per week

Plan C- Features

• Straight 3- hour session in the AM and PM.

• Half hour special area activity for morning and afternoon session.

• Total of 15 hours of kindergarten per week.

Stage Four: After four weeks of meetings and analyzing their school plan by the individual school committees, the Interim

Kindergarten Committee (27-members) reconvened several times to discuss each plan. The most important outcome of this stage was to brainstorm the pluses, minuses, and interesting features (P.M.I.) of each plan and decide on one plan for the district kindergarten program.

Stage Five: Identify and discuss the pluses, minuses, and interesting elements from the three Plans: A, B, and C:

Pluses of Plans A and B-

- creative use of time
- children would experience one full day per week of kindergarten
- less stressful for children
- more productive time to work with children on projects
- parents would have one full day with their child per week
- parents would have one full day without their child per week

Pluses of Plan C-

- continuity and consistent
- easier to plan for school and community activities
- parents can easily plan for child care provisions
- conventional- conservative plan
- special activity period is planned in AM and PM sessions

Minuses of Plans A and B-

- difficult to arrange child care services
- children in Am session would receive less hours when school is delayed due to snow and ice conditions
- hard to" sell" the parents in the community because of its unique features
- hard to convince the Board of Education that these plans will provide a quality program

Minuses for Plan C-

- no long blocks of time for projects
- more stress on children and teachers due to start (set-up) and finish (take down) and prepare for the p.m. session
- no full day experience- 99 per cent of the children attended day care/nursery school
- only 15 minutes between two sessions

Interesting elements of Plans A and B-

- different way of looking at a half- day-15 hours kindergarten program
- could be a quality program if parents approved
- what would be the educational impact on a child who was absence for several days?

Interesting elements of Plan C-

- teachers may be not be able to deliver the same morning program in the afternoon session
- compromise plan

Stage Six: After six weeks of meetings, a consensus interim plan was agreed upon by the entire Interim Kindergarten Committee and was presented to the Board of Education. The Board of Education approved Plan C and requested that this plan be presented to all parents of in-coming kindergarten children at the three elementary schools.

Stage Seven: Plan C was presented to the parents with the following structure and organization:

- two teachers were assigned to an morning class of 20 children and an afternoon class of 20 children.

- staffing designed for interim period until the extended day (21 hour program) was re-established in two years after the extension construction is completed at all three schools.

- maintaining extended day goals, objectives, and assessments- decreasing enrichment sessions and incidental activities.
- same program for morning and afternoon sessions

• exception policy for placing children in morning sessions based on single working parents, or dual working parents requiring morning day care (afternoon day care is available in three programs in town), or children with special needs requiring treatment in the AM when personnel is available at school.

Parent **Q**uestions and our **R**esponses based on the Plan C - Interim Kindergarten Program

Q• Will children have their own bus?
R• Morning children will ride the morning bus with the rest of the children in grades 1-5. In the afternoon, children will ride the bus that brings the p.m. children at 11:45. The p.m. children will ride the bus that takes the children in grades 1-5 home.

Q• Will teachers divide the children in groups of ten?
R• Teachers will team-teach and work with all the children. At times, children may work in small groups with one teacher.

Q• Will the teachers "know" individual children's progress?
R• Teachers will be in a perfect position to know each child's strengths and dispositions because of the small children to teacher ration in the classroom.

Q• When will teachers eat lunch and set-up for the next session?
R• A special curriculum area activity will be built into the schedule at 11:00-11:30 each day to enable the teachers to set-up for the afternoon session. In addition, a half hour special will be set-up in the afternoon to allow teachers to have their lunch. Both morning and afternoon sessions will have one special activity period each day.

Q• What happens if there are many school delays due to snow?
R• If the teachers feel this a serious issue, make-up days could be possible by giving some afternoon sessions to the morning session.

Q• Will there be conference days like the extended day program?
R• Yes, we will flip-flop the 4 half- day conferences to equalize the times for each session.

Q• Will children eat lunch or bring snacks?
R• Lunch will not be served but snacks will be provided.

Q• Who will watch the children as they leave the morning session and the afternoon children enter?
R• One teacher will take the arriving afternoon children from the bus and the other teacher will put the morning children on the bus to go home. The children will always have a teacher or two with them at all times.

Q• What will be missing from the interim program that was in the extended- day 21 hour program?
R• Less time for socialization (lunch) and less enrichment and incidental learning opportunities for in-depth projects based on children's interests.

Q• Will the children benefit from such an interim program?
R• Absolutely- will the interest from the teachers to team-teach and small class sizes for individual and personal attention- this interim program will work out extremely well.

Summary

What New Canaan accomplished was an interim kindergarten program (PLAN C) that would be staffed with two teachers working cooperatively in the morning (AM) session and afternoon (PM) session with each class (both AM and PM) having about 20 children in each session. The Board of Education had approved this "rich" staffing in order to retain the staff when the established and very successful extended day 21 hours program returns in two years. The parents believed that small class sizes with two trained teachers in each class would be a huge advantage for their children. The established kindergarten developmentally appropriate goals, objectives and assessments will be the core experiences of the interim kindergarten program.

Additionally, the half-day interim kindergarten program (Plan C) would not cost any more then the current extended day program. Also, establishing a half-day kindergarten program in each school would free-up two to three classrooms in each school. This kindergarten organization in each school would accommodate the anticipated increases in enrollment for the subsequent years.

Conclusion

There are no doubts that New Canaan Public Schools has the solid financial base and educational commitment to provide such a secure program for the children in their town. But remember that the children are the wonderful recipients of this two-teacher staffing for each class of twenty children and the retainment of those successful priorities that defined the previous extended day kindergarten program.

Furthermore, the team-teaching excitement that the half-day program generated amongst the teachers and administration was extremely encouraging and fostered extensive professional staff development opportunities in such areas as team-teaching, mixed-age grouping and parent involvement activities.

Perhaps equally as important as the "comfort" level that this program should provide both the children and their parents was the process that "this community of learners" established over a nine month transition period. Teachers from three different schools with three different space considerations went

through a very significant professional decision-making process. We took the necessary time to construct a program design that would be in the best interest of children. Through various stages of studying all the factors involved at each school, and having to compromise at all the professional levels- a plan was developed and embraced by all the stackholders involved. A new "look" opportunity to listen and react to various and interesting Plans (A and B), certainly promoted professional reflection and renewal. So often when public school decisions about young children are made the "feeder" schools, in our case the nursery and day-care personnel, are hardly ever included in the decision-making process. For New Canaan Public Schools, the nursery schools and day-care personnel, as well as parents, were warmly invited to actively participate from the "get-go" and contributed significantly to the public school and preschool Interim Kindergarten Program Committee.

The three elementary principals were provided a wonderful leadership opportunity by the Superintendent of Schools and the Board of Education. From this principal's point- of-experience, that leadership charge was a very special professional feeling to be able to work so closely with the Board of

Education, Superintendent of Schools, teachers, parents and the nursery school personnel.

If teachers are to be the ultimate curriculum makers in our public schools, and I believe they should, then such an experience will go deep to reassure the profession that it is indeed possible in this particular rarified educational environment to provide "rich experiences" for the children in the New Canaan community that the schools serve. Incidentally, the three schools opened up two to three additional classroom spaces in each of their buildings which were required to accommodate the additional enrollment.